Date and Time: Friday, August 18, 2023 11:43:00AM PDT

Job Number: 203873554

Document (1)

1. *Fresh wave of climate protests to target gas ahead of COP26 summit*

   Client/Matter: -None-

   Search Terms: "climate justice"

   Search Type: Natural Language

   Narrowed by:

Content Type	Narrowed by
News	Language: English; Sources: National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post)(Canada); All Content Types: News; Geography by Document: North America; Geography by Document: Canada

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Fresh wave of climate protests to target gas ahead of COP26 summit

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

July 30, 2021 Friday

Web Edition

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Section: PMN ENVIRONMENT

Length: 1061 words

Body

* Activists shift focus from coal to gas production

* Extinction Rebellion to launch more London protests next month

* International school strike planned for September 24

By Arthur Neslen

BRUSSELS, July 30 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Climate activists will try to shut down gas terminals and protest fracking plans in several countries this weekend, as a post-lockdown push to influence the agenda ahead of November's COP26 climate summit in Scotland kicks off in earnest.

The school strikes and city-stopping actions that pushed global warming to the top of the political priority list before the COVID-19 pandemic are also set to resume in coming weeks.

The grassroots Extinction Rebellion group has said it will launch two weeks of actions against new fossil fuel investments in London next month.

The Fridays For Future student movement, meanwhile, has called a global school strike for Sept. 24, which falls during the U.N. General Assembly where leaders will discuss their responses to climate change.

"Global citizens are at the beginning of an escalation of actions and activities that will be culminating at the COP (climate summit)," said Asad Rehman, a spokesman for the COP26 Coalition, an umbrella for unions, aid agencies, faith and green groups working on ***climate justice***.

A global day of protest for climate equity will take place on Nov. 6 in the middle of the COP26 summit, added Rehman, who is also director of anti-poverty charity War on Want.

However, coronavirus, cost and climate change concerns will prevent some activists from traveling to the main demonstration in Glasgow, where the conference will take place.

This weekend, up to 3,000 activists from Germany's Ende Gelaende, a green civil disobedience movement, plan to blockade the Brunsbuttel liquefied natural gas terminal in a bid to stop operations.

"It's going to be the biggest mass action since the lockdown began," said spokeswoman Ronja Weil.

Campaigners will also take to the streets in a dozen countries including Argentina, Ireland, Bolivia and Canada.

In a strategic shift, they are targeting gas rather than coal plants, and linking actions in the Global North and South.

Their target, according to Esteban Servat, who co-initiated the Shale Must Fall group which called this weekend's protests, is European multinationals "that are doing abroad what they cannot do at home - namely fracking."

Servat, an Argentinian scientist, says he fled his country for Germany because of "intense persecution and death threats" after leaking a government report that linked contaminated water tables to fracking.

Another protest at Scotland's Mossmorran gas plant complex on Sunday aims to "amplify the struggle of local communities," which have to contend with pollution, noise and gas flaring, said Benji Brown, a spokesman for Climate Camp Scotland.

"Even where I live in Edinburgh, which is 20 miles away, you can see (the plant) light up the sky at night," he said.

The action also intends "to create space for the climate movement in Scotland to regroup and rebuild momentum in the run-up to COP26," he added.

COP26 host Britain is putting pressure on other countries to commit to ending the use of, and funding for, coal power.

But natural gas - a less carbon-intensive fossil fuel - is being supported by some governments as a "bridge" to a cleaner energy mix.

ONLINE COLLABORATION

Around the world, COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions have pushed much climate activism online since early 2020.

But while governments have since made fresh promises to green their economies, climate-heating emissions are still rising.

At the same time, headlines about heatwaves, floods and wildfires have flashed by with dizzying speed, as climate change impacts accelerate.

"There is a growing frustration about the lack of adequate climate action, which has been hidden by the pandemic," said Wendel Trio, director of Climate Action Network Europe.

Vaccine inequity and online link-ups during the pandemic have spurred greater coordination between activists in wealthy nations and developing countries, he added.

"This global movement will use the COP26 momentum to bring climate action and equity back to the forefront, in whatever way necessary," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

But the pandemic is still shaping how protests happen.

Ende Gelaende, for instance, insists on testing, face masks and social distancing for its actions.

Extinction Rebellion spokeswoman Nuala Gathercole Lam said the pandemic had been "a big obstacle" - although the group has continued to mount actions like a blockade of print works used by Rupert Murdoch's News UK group in 2020.

FOSSIL FUEL FINANCE

As Britain's COVID-19 restrictions have eased, Gathercole Lam said "fresh waves of climate activists" were getting involved as the group prepares to take to the streets again in the week of Aug. 23 to oppose fossil fuel finance.

Despite a recent report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) calling for an end to new fossil fuel investments, about $600 billion has gone into new gas fields, pipelines and LNG facilities under development, according to analytics firm GlobalData.

That is fueling fears that the chances of pegging global warming to the Paris climate accord's most ambitious limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial times may be dwindling.

To meet the goal, emissions would need to fall by 7.6% every year until 2030, according to the United Nations Environment Programme.

While greenhouse gas emissions did drop by about 6% in 2020 due to the global economic disruption caused by the pandemic, the IEA expects them to rise again to a record high in 2023. Since last year, gas has been responsible for more European emissions than lignite coal, according to an analysis of EU Emissions Trading System data by the Ember think-tank.

Extinction Rebellion's Gathercole Lam said members would next month demand an end to "all new investment in fossil fuels immediately."

"We'll be in the City of London where much of the money flows into the fossil fuel industry, taking action there," she added. (Reporting by Arthur Neslen. Editing by Megan Rowling. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers the lives of people around the world who struggle to live freely or fairly. Visit http://news.trust.org) !@COPYRIGHT=© 2021 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CLIMATE ACTION (90%); ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (90%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); TRENDS & EVENTS (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (89%); CLIMATOLOGY (89%); NEGATIVE NEWS (79%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (78%); NEGATIVE SOCIETAL NEWS (78%); POLLUTION (78%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (78%); STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS (78%); CONFERENCES & CONVENTIONS (77%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (77%); PUBLIC HEALTH (76%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (75%); EPIDEMICS (75%); INFECTIOUS DISEASE (75%); CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE (73%); MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS (73%); UNITED NATIONS (73%); CORONAVIRUSES (70%); GLOBAL WARMING (70%); PANDEMICS (70%); RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS (66%); POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS (64%); WATER POLLUTION (60%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (53%); VIRUSES (50%); activists,shift,focus,production,extinction,rebellion !@PERMALINK= https://nationalpost.com/pmn/environment-pmn/fresh-wave-of-climate-protests-to-target-gas-ahead-of-cop26-summit (%)

Industry: OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (90%); HYDRAULIC FRACTURING (89%); NATURAL GAS PRODUCTS (89%); COAL FIRED PLANTS (78%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (78%); FOSSIL FUEL POWER PLANTS (78%); LIQUEFIED NATURAL GAS (78%); NATURAL GAS (78%); OIL & GAS STORAGE FACILITIES (78%); OIL & GAS FACILITIES (77%); COAL INDUSTRY (73%); FOSSIL FUELS (73%); GLOBAL WARMING (70%)

Geographic: LONDON, ENGLAND (88%); BRUSSELS, BELGIUM (73%); EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND (72%); GLASGOW, SCOTLAND (58%); SCOTLAND (93%); ARGENTINA (92%); GERMANY (90%)

Load-Date: July 30, 2021